

Marine Corps Times
June 13, 2005 Edition

New gear focuses on one thing: A good, clean shot

By Christian Lowe

New communications gear is great when it's time to call in an air strike, talk with higher headquarters from miles away or hail a medevac helicopter. But equally important are the infantryman's more basic tools of the trade.

That's why distributed operations planners aim to give grunts the gear they really need, rather than unfamiliar gadgets that provide marginal advantage in a close-in fight. When distributed ops platoons deploy, they'll have a host of new gear that planners say will enhance the most important part of a Marine: his weapon.

Every platoon member, from platoon commander to the newest rifleman, will receive the "Rifleman's Suite" gear package. And officials stress that no one in the platoon will be handed a single piece of the new gear before he's been trained to use it.

"The idea is to make available to Marines those items that he needs to do the job in a single set," said Lt. Col. Chris Carolan, who heads the distributed ops implementation effort for the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab at Quantico, Va. "We want to give this to the rifleman from the start."

The suite is designed to give infantrymen a greater "ability to locate the enemy, deliver more accurate, well coordinated firepower over a greater range and greater close-combat capabilities," according to a Jan. 19 Warfighting Lab report on distributed ops.

The suite includes:

M16 A4. The service rifle familiar to every Marine.

Day and night combat optics. The success of the Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight prompted planners to equip distributed ops platoons with a similar optic for nighttime use. At least for now, platoons will deploy with two optics until engineers can develop and field an optic that combines day and night capabilities - a breakthrough officials say is about three years away.

Collapsible rifle stock. In some situations, a fixed-stock rifle can prove too cumbersome, especially in the tight confines of urban combat.

Suppressor. A controversial addition, the suppressor is intended to give a grunt the option to be more stealthy and hinder an enemy's ability to locate the Marine's firing position, said Vince Goulding, director of the Warfighting Lab's Sea Viking Division, which runs distributed ops experimentation. Even without the use of subsonic rounds - which, when coupled with the suppressor, make gunfire nearly "silent" - the device can give an added margin of safety in certain situations.

Bayonet. Already a part of the infantryman's kit, the Corps' new fighting knife/bayonet will remain an important tool.

Rifle bipod. If a squad leader needs to designate a rifleman as a sharpshooter or to man an overwatch position, each grunt will have the capability of delivering more accurate fire with a stabilized weapon.

White/infrared flashlight. The light can be attached to the rifle for use as a standard flashlight or to illuminate targets at night viewed through a night-vision device.

Compass and hand-held Global Positioning System receiver. Since any infantryman might be called upon to help call in a helicopter pickup, or artillery or air support, it's important that he knows his exact position, planners said. And because distributed ops emphasize long-range patrolling and surveillance, a compass is a must-have.

Personal-role radio. Marines can use these hand-held radios to communicate with other platoon members at short ranges. The radio is a militarized version of the commercial radios many Marines already carry in combat operations.

Some of the items may be replaced or refined if experience shows they're not needed or are unwieldy, Goulding said. And when any of the suites' components are refined, they'll be fielded.

The price tag: about \$9,900 per infantryman, Carolan said.